

Roslyn MacKinlay (nee Clarke) in her 1969 class photo.



# IN A CLASS OF HER OWN

How trailblazer became first woman to get WA engineering degree

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Sitting in the front row of her 1969 class photo, impossible to ignore among three dozen men, Roslyn Clarke's smile tells the story of a young woman for whom years of hard graft had earned her a place at university.

What the black-and-white photo does not reveal is that the country girl with the big smile, who grew up on a Wheatbelt farm near Wongan Hills as one of four children, would go on to make history as the first woman to receive an engineering degree in WA.

"When I told my parents (I wanted to study engineering) ... they were not remotely fazed," she in a 2019 interview as part of an engineering heritage oral history project.

"But I met a boyfriend ... in (my) final year of school and



his parents lived in Dalkeith and were part of high-society in Dalkeith and they were horrified that I was going to do engineering.

"Girls should stay home and look after their husbands, that was my father-in-law's take on the world, and he maintained that for ever," she said.

The biggest worry for the University of WA's dean of



engineering at the time, she said, appeared to be the lack of female toilets on site.

Not that Ms Clarke would have known it at the time, but two decades earlier the same issue had been thrown up for Shirley Strickland, who would go on to become one of Australia's greatest Olympians, when she tried to enrol in engineering at UWA in 1943.

"The dean was dumbfounded during our brief meeting in his office," Strickland recalled in a 1999 interview. "He told me I should not enrol because the building had no women's toilet. I was embarrassed and went off to enrol in science."

For the first couple of years of her degree Ms Clarke simply used the staff toilets. And despite being the lone woman among 200-odd men, she had no memory of being nervous.

"I'd gone from an all-girls school to university where it was nearly all boys, but I don't remember feeling any apprehension," she said of that time.

"No one was rude to me."

Ms Clarke became Mrs MacKinlay when she married Alistair MacKinlay in 1971, two months before graduating with honours. They had two sons, Daniel and Andrew.

After graduating, Mrs MacKinlay applied for an engi-

neering design job but was told "thanks, but no thanks" because "they weren't employing females". But she went on to work in various civil and structural engineering roles.

Among her employers was Joe Wyche, a former contemporary at UWA. An admirer of her professional expertise, in the early 2000s he persuaded her to switch from materials handling and processing to join him designing and building bridges around Perth.

Mrs MacKinlay said it was a career counsellor at Methodist Ladies' College who first suggested she try engineering.

Had she and her sister Helen, an artist, not been sent to boarding school when she was 13, she said the pair "would have ended up staying there (Wongan Hills) for ever and marrying farmers".

Mrs MacKinlay died from cancer earlier this year.